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Caste and Kuñcan Nampyār's *Ghōṣayātra*

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by

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In this report, a close reading and expository analysis of Kuñcan Nampyār's Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal compositions, specifically *Ghōṣayātra*, will serve to reveal Nampyār's view on points of social tension during his lifetime. Given that there is very little academic work in English regarding Kuñcan Nampyār and his compositions, a significant portion of the report is devoted to orienting Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal in relation to other more studied dance forms of Kerala, such as Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Kathakalī. Further, reflection on the place of his compositions within current discussions of caste will emphasize the relevance of Nampyār's compositions to contemporary scholarship. The primary source used is a Malayalam collection of Nampyār's works entitled *Kuñcan Nampyāruṭe Tuḷḷalkṛtikal* edited by Em. Es. Candraśēkhara Vāriyar. There are no comprehensive English translations of Nampyār's works; therefore, much of the translation of *Ghōṣayātra* included in the report will be original. I rely heavily on the works of Robin Jeffrey, C.J. Fuller, and Ēvūr Paramēśvaran for information regarding the broader context and social environment.

One major characteristic of Nampyār's compositions is his use of satire and sarcasm; large segments of *Ghōṣayātra* in particular ridicule the Nāyars, an elite warrior caste. Further, Nampyār provides accounts of specific castes and their roles within the society conveyed in the plot of *Ghōṣayātra*. This text, in keeping with a *Purāṇic* theme, portrays the march of the

Kauravas on the Pāṇḍavas residing happily in the Dvaita Forest. This report highlights the significance of Nampyār's ridicule of certain castes in *Ghōṣayātra*, as well as the presence of portrayals of specific castes within the plot in order to argue that Nampyār uses *Ghōṣayātra* to convey his critical perspective toward social issues during his lifetime. The role of *Ghōṣayātra* in portraying social issues in Nampyār's time also emphasizes the importance of the performative and creative perspective in analyzing Kerala history.

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Introduction

The most common origin story of Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal is that during a performance of Cākyār Kūttū, the author credited with the invention of Tuḷḷal—Kuñcan Nampyār (1705-1770)—fell asleep while playing the *miḷāvū*. The main Tuḷḷal performer promptly ridiculed Nampyār for sleeping. Incensed, the very next day, Nampyār wrote an entire play that would provide a contrast to Cākyār Kūttū sufficient to quell his derision. Other origin stories suggest that Nampyār was provoked into writing a play after being mocked for playing the *miḷāvū* badly, or that he was not included in a performance by a group of artists to which he belonged and as a result endeavored to create his own art form.¹ Regardless of the details of the origin of Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal, its performance came to find a place in the variety of performance arts of Kerala. It developed into a locus for the articulation of discourse surrounding caste and its manifestation in literary and performative composition, while at the same time drawing an audience composed of an array of social classes.

Viewing Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal, and the *Ghōṣayātra* in particular, as active spaces where social issues are negotiated is critical to a full understanding of Kuñcan Nampyār's immediate cultural environment. Through a close reading, this report will highlight this aspect of the *Ghōṣayātra* to demonstrate that engaging with the text on this level can be a fruitful academic exercise. However, in order to fully understand Tuḷḷal, it is important to study it in the context of other performance arts in Kerala and their corresponding literary and performative orientations, especially with regard to caste. This will serve to orient Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal, and by extension the *Ghōṣayātra*, within a larger framework, allowing for comparisons to be drawn between traditions. There are very few studies of Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal in English, therefore I include several

¹ V. S. Sharma, *Kunchan Nampyar* (New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2000). 18.

Malayalam sources and studies, of which there are plenty. By doing this, I hope to be able to begin to bring the study of Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal into Western academic discourse, working to elevate it to the status enjoyed by Kathakaḷi, Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Cākyār Kūttū, and Teyyam.

Section I—Kerala Performing Arts

Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal, although a rich performance art in and of itself, developed within the context of other Kerala performing arts. Contained here is a brief description and definition of Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal in the context of other performance arts in Kerala. Observing the richness of this particular performance art also serves to add value to studying Kerala performing traditions as a whole. This section will offer summaries of four important performance traditions in Kerala to orient the reader towards a more complete understanding of Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal. The traditions which will be elaborated upon in this section are Kathakaḷi, Teyyam, Kūṭiyāṭṭam, and Cākyār Kūttū. Kathakaḷi, an elite performance tradition utilizing Sanskrit and epic themes, is commonly attributed to the 17th century. Kathakaḷi is a type of performance art in which performers recite a text, or perform alongside the recitation of a text. The performance has historically been hereditary, with each performative role being allotted to a specific caste, and knowledge of or training for this role being passed from teacher to student based his lineage and caste.² The music of Kathakaḷi uses Carnatic or Dravidian systems of *rasas*, *tālas*, and *rāgas*. They refer respectively to a composition's "mood", rhythm, and musical scale.³ Kathakaḷi performances are narrative and also use an elaborate system of *mudrās*, or hand gestures, that help inform the plot. Kathakaḷi performers are generally male. Costumes worn in Kathakaḷi performances are bright and multi-colored with detailed head pieces, with each costume representing a different character. Kathakaḷi displays largely classical components, meaning that the lyrics of the plays are composed mainly in Sanskrit, and contain only small portions of Malayalam.⁴ The narrative

² Rich Freeman, "The Teyyam Tradition of Kerala," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism*, ed. Gavin Flood, 1st ed. (John Wiley & Sons, 2005), 309.

³ Regula Quereshi et al., "India, Subcontinent Of," Grove Music Online, January 31, 2020.

⁴ At the time that many Kathakaḷi performances were composed, Malayalam was not known widely as "Malayalam," but as *Bhāṣā*. *Bhāṣā* can be best described as an earlier Dravidian language and has components of what are now known as Southern Indian languages in varying degrees. This differs yet another degree from

for these plays is often drawn from classical Sanskrit themes, commonly the *Mahābhārata*, elevating the tradition to an elite status.⁵

Various styles of Teyyam, another performance tradition in Kerala with central ritual implications, are thought to have originated in what is now Tamil Nadu. With this performance art, the aim is for the performer to become “possessed” by the deity which is the focus of that particular Teyyam performance. The performer, who is possessed, interacts with the audience as if he himself *is* the god.⁶ According to Freeman, this transformation of the performer is the most important identifying characteristic of the performance. Teyyam is conducted in sacred groves, or *kāvus*, rather than temples. The music associated with Teyyam performances does not bear Carnatic structure.⁷ In Teyyam, performances are often a portrayal of narrative relating to the deity of focus as an object of praise. Teyyam performers are most often male, and there is most often only one performer, sometimes with two men encircling the “possessed” performer to guide him. Teyyam performance has historically been hereditary as well. Teyyam costumes bear elaborate headpieces. The majority of Teyyam performances are based on local legend surrounding the deity of focus to the performance. Rich Freeman describes the ritual performance art of Teyyam as a folk practice attributed to subaltern groups, characterizing it as a mix between “High Hindu practice” and Dravidian possession worship. Here, a dichotomy is

vernacular, which is commonly spoken *Bhāṣā*. The *Līlātilakam* in the 12th century was a significant step toward the identification of Malayalam as a separate language attributed to those who reside in what is now known as “Kerala”. Phillip Zarrilli writes of several examples of the of usages of Sanskrit and Malayalam in Kathakali. One usage of purely Malayalam is the presence of “*eti*,” the “feminine addressive form of a common marketplace insult that is literally untranslatable.” Phillip Zarrilli, “An Ocean of Possibilities: From ‘Lokadharmī to Nāṭyadharmī’ in a “Kathakali Santānagōpālam,” *Comparative Drama* 28, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 86. One example of a strong influence of Sanskrit in Kathakali lyrics is the phrase *tavamukham abhimukham kāmēn* in the Kathakali *Naṭacaritam*. Pi. Karuṇākaran Nāyar, ed., *Naṭacaritam (Āṭṭakatha)* (Trivandrum: Sudha Publications, n.d.), 1. The Sanskrit second-person pronoun is used, and the Sanskrit term “*mukham*.” With the word “*kāmēn*,” a Dravidian personal ending is used, as well as the Dravidian word for seeing (*kāṇi*).

⁵ Zarrilli, “An Ocean of Possibilities: From ‘Lokadharmī to Nāṭyadharmī’ in a “Kathakali Santānagōpālam.”

⁶ Freeman, “The Teyyam Tradition of Kerala,” 308.

⁷ T. V. Chandran, *Ritual as Ideology: Text and Context in Teyyam*, New Vistas in Indian Performing Arts 5 (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, n.d.), 72.

established between “High Hindu” practices that involve Purāṇic deities and higher castes, and Dravidian folk practices that involve possession and subaltern castes.⁸

Kūṭiyāṭṭam is thought to have originated anywhere from the 9th-12th centuries.⁹ Earlier in its history, it was performed exclusively in temples, although that is no longer the case, as it is sometimes performed on national stages, such as in the context of a showcase or art institution.¹⁰ Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance has historically been hereditary, following Teyyam and Kathakalī. Also following from Kathakalī, Kūṭiyāṭṭam presents itself as an elite tradition. Kūṭiyāṭṭam also uses Carnatic systems of *rasas*, *tālas*, and *rāgas*, but it uses certain combinations of these in greater proportions than with the other performance traditions. Kūṭiyāṭṭam performances are narrative and also use an elaborate and unique system of *mudrās*, which Moser references as “ritually significant movements.”¹¹ In Kūṭiyāṭṭam, female performers are common. The lyrical elements of Kūṭiyāṭṭam consist mostly of Sanskrit, which is used extensively, and Prakrit.¹² In contrast, Moser writes, however, that passages of Sanskrit may be interspersed with vernacular Malayalam “explanations” of said passages. They may also be interspersed with “ancient Malayalam” which she states may be enlightening with regard to past social structures.¹³ Kūttū, an umbrella term covering manifold styles of performance, originated in what is now Tamil Nadu, anywhere within the first millennium BCE, like Teyyam. Various forms of Kūttū are thought to be the origin of Kūṭiyāṭṭam and Kathakalī. While it would be impossible to

⁸ Freeman, “The Teyyam Tradition of Kerala,” 307.

⁹ Freeman, 308.; Lowthorp, Leah. “Folklore, Politics, and the State: Kūṭiyāṭṭam Theatre and National/Global Heritage in India.” *South Asian History and Culture* 8, no. 4 (September 22, 2017): 542–59.

¹⁰ Moser claims that Kūṭiyāṭṭam was “intended for the educated elite,” and can be identified as the “traditional Sanskrit theater.” Heike Moser, “Many ‘Kūṭiyāṭṭams’: Emotions and Rituals in Kerala’s Sanskrit Theater between Tradition and Modernity,” in *Emotions in Rituals and Performances*, ed. Axel Michaels and Christoph Wulf (New Delhi: Routledge, 2012), 382.

¹¹ Moser, 383.

¹² E.g. Moser includes a Prakrit portion of the Kūṭiyāṭṭam performance Mantrāṅkam: *ēśā khu mama raśaṇa khāyidukāma liṅgāni karēdi* (“my tongue makes signs of appetite!”). Moser, 385.

¹³ Moser, 382.

characterize Kūttū as a whole given its manifold forms, it is productive to describe a particular form of Kūttū which was popular and relevant to Nampyār himself, although not exclusively so: Cākyār Kūttū. This performance form is often considered a part of the tradition of Kūtiyāṭṭam, but is observed separately here. Like the others, Cākyār Kūttū has historically been a hereditary performance tradition, although this is no longer the case. Castes that perform Cākyār Kūttū have been the Nampyār, Nanñyār, or Cākyār castes. Hence, Nampyār's lineage aligns with his role as a performer for the temple. Cākyār Kūttū performers have been both female and male. Cākyār Kūttū lyrics have a large proportion of Malayalam when compared to Sanskrit.¹⁴ In terms of location, Cākyār Kūttū performances have historically been conducted on a stage just outside temples.

It is within the context of these performance traditions in Kerala that Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal must be understood. Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal is the youngest of the performance arts that have been discussed so far. It grew in popularity in the 18th century, with the life of Kuñcan Nampyār. There were three main Tuḷḷal styles, namely Ōṭṭan, Paṛayan, and Śītaṅkan, which can be distinguished by the time of the day at which they are performed. Although Nampyār has written in all three Tuḷḷal styles, his compositions brought fame to Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal specifically. Further, although Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal was being performed before Nampyār began composing plays, Nampyār brought such significant innovations to Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal that he is commonly credited with its invention, and so Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal is now the primary performed style of Tuḷḷal.¹⁵

Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal performances took place outside of temples, similar to Cākyār Kūttū. This speaks to the origin story mentioned earlier: Nampyār developed his Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal compositions in response to Cākyār Kūttū. Of course, as with any of the traditions discussed here,

¹⁴ *Chakyar Koothu of Kerala (Vol. I)* (Delhi, 1988), Centre for Cultural Resources & Training.

¹⁵ Sharma, *Kunchan Nampyār*. 38.

contemporary performances of Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal may take place at a variety of locations other than stages outside temples (e.g. stages at national showcases of various performing arts).



Performance of Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal as Nampyār conceived of it is not hereditary like the other traditions mentioned here.¹⁶ The reciter of Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal lyrics does not have any accompaniment other than two musicians. That is, he is the only person reciting the text. This monologue format contrasts with many of the other performance arts in Kerala, where there is more than one performer (eg. Kathakalī and Kūṭiyāṭṭam). Further, Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal performers are all male, as with Kathakalī and Teyyam. The Kerala performance arts mentioned here all utilize elaborate costuming, and Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal is no exception to this. Costumes are bright and multi-colored with detailed head pieces. However, while the costumes in other performance arts are intended to each

¹⁶ Leah Lowthorp, “Folklore, Politics, and the State: Kūṭiyāṭṭam Theatre and National/Global Heritage in India,” *South Asian History and Culture* 8, no. 4 (September 22, 2017): 3–4.

represent specific characters or deities, Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal is not this way. Instead, they function primarily to enhance aesthetics.

One element central to Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal performance is narrative. While narrative is important in the other performing arts, it is portrayed in different and unique ways in Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal. It is structured as a monologue, which accentuates the narrative of the composition further. Its non-ritualized nature makes the narrative a central aspect of the performance art (unlike, for example, Teyyam, in which the ritual is the central intention of the tradition). *Mudrās* are not as vital to the narrative in Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal in comparison to Kathakaḷi and Kūṭiyāṭṭam, and, when present, they are not ritually significant. With Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal, there is not any one particular deity to which the performance is dedicated, even though all Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal performances and texts begin with a prayer to various deities.¹⁷

Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal is distinct from other performance arts in the nature of its lyrics. Nampyār's compositions include a balance of vernacular Malayalam and Sanskrit-derived language. Similar to Kathakaḷi and Kūṭiyāṭṭam, Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal compositions are also based on themes from the *Rāmāyaṇa* and *Mahābhārata*. However, while Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal lyrics draw from the epics, its lyrics are less Sanskrit-based and more rooted in Malayalam. Although Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal does diverge from a strictly classical classification, it also is not exclusively Dravidian in its lyrics, or based exclusively on local legend.

The balance that Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal strikes between Sanskrit, vernacular Malayalam, and inspiration from epic themes allows Nampyār's works to appeal to the person who has not been educated to the elite level in Sanskrit, while still capturing “classical” religious imagery and meaning. This format enables Nampyār to map the experiences of average people over tales

¹⁷ Chandran, 72-74.

derived from an epic base. This, in turn creates a leverage with which Nampyār is able to readily introduce religious discussion (including critical discussion) to a more public platform than that of the religious “elite” Kathakaḷi, Kūṭiyāṭṭam, or Cākyār Kūttū. In this way, the language of composition was a deciding factor in the audience of the performance art; those who were able to understand compositions with a high proportion of Sanskrit were able to resonate closely with Kathakaḷi and Kūṭiyāṭṭam, while those who more readily understood vernacular were likely able to resonate most closely with Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal performances. This dichotomy is helpful in observing Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal performance and composition, in which elements, such as location, theme, language, etc., reminiscent of both “High Hindu” practice and Dravidian origins come together to the extent that the performance is not exclusively attributable to either characteristic, thus functioning to draw in diverse audiences.

Section II-Social Issues, Kuñcan Nampyār, and *Ghōṣayātra*

Ghōṣayātra

Now that Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal has been situated in respect to other performance traditions in Kerala, the particular text of interest to this study, *Ghōṣayātra*, can be introduced. The date of composition of *Ghōṣayātra* cannot be determined with any accuracy, except of course that it was during the life of the author. The title of this composition translates to “procession,” and conjures images of a parade. This title itself is ironic in that the entirety of the composition is centered around the march of the Kauravas on the Dvaita Forest, a journey which would otherwise be interpreted as a serious military venture rather than a festive journey (literally “battle-cry” (*ghōṣa*) “journey” (*yātra*). However, as the plot unravels, Nampyār reveals the many ways in which the intended show of force and intimidation by the Kauravas goes awry, turning into a disorganized spectacle. This contrasts with the *Mahābhārata* version of the story, which is literally titled “The Cattle Expedition,” given that the Kauravas bring cattle on the march as a show of force in this version.¹⁸

Kuñcan Nampyār structures *Ghōṣayātra* with a prayer section, followed by a main plot which frames a sub-plot. The prayer section praises deities commonly addressed at the beginning of texts of Kerala performance arts, including Ganapati, Śiva, and Sarasvatī. This section contains a large amount of praise toward the king Ulakuṭe Perumāḷ. Notably, the praise given to him is longer than that which is given to any of the deities. In the main plot, Ulakuṭe Perumāḷ conducts a meeting with his ministers because a separate king over whom he has jurisdiction killed five of his brothers. Ulakuṭe Perumāḷ calls for war, but an old minister advises him against

¹⁸ “The Book of the Forest” 3.226-35. J.A.B. van Buitenen, trans., *The Mahābhārata: The Book of the Assembly Hall, The Book of the Forest*, vol. 2, 2 vols. (The University of Chicago Press, 1975). 207-8.

it. He provides the story of “*Ghōṣayātra*”—the Kauravas’ march on the Dvaita Forest—as a cautionary tale in an attempt to dissuade Ulakūṭe Perumāḷ from war. This story becomes the sub-plot of the play.¹⁹

In the sub-plot, the Kauravas desire to know just how miserably the Pāṇḍavas are while exiled in the forest, and send a messenger to spy on them.²⁰ The messenger returns and reports that the Pāṇḍavas are living quite happily. Enraged, the Kauravas create a parade of sorts comprised largely of Nāyars, but containing any other “strong” caste, with the intent of intimidating the Pāṇḍavas into submission. They march on the Dvaita Forest and, once there, decide to secretly poison the pond in which the Pāṇḍavas bathe. Gandharvans who are bathing in the pond come to know that the Kauravas are attempting to poison the pond, and engage the Kauravas in a battle. Subsequently, Arjuna discovers the Kaurava presence in the forest, their plan to poison the pond, and their imprisonment by Citrasena of the Gandharvans. The Pāṇḍavas emerge at the edge of the forest to address the commotion, and tell Citrasena to let the Kauravas go. Initially, Citrasena refuses to release them. This causes Arjuna to overcome the Gandharvans using his celestial powers. The Gandharvans, defeated, are pleased with the piety of Arjuna’s request to free the Kauravas, and therefore bestow blessings upon the Pāṇḍavas and send the Kauravas back to Hastinapuram in shame.²¹

The sub-plot closely corresponds with an episode of the *Mahābhārata*, but with notable exceptions. In the *Mahābhārata* version, the Kauravas march to the Dvaita Forest with cattle,

¹⁹ Kuñcan Nampyār, “Ghōṣayātra,” in *Kuñcan Nampyāruṭe Tuḷḷal Kṛtikal* (Current Books, 1986). 233-4.

²⁰ The beginning of the sub-plot is set in the context of the Pāṇḍavas’ 12-year exile in the Dvaita Forest after Yudhiṣṭhira loses a game of dice against Śakuni.

²¹ Nampyār, “Ghōṣayātra.” 233-81.

without emphasis on the inclusion or exclusion of a particular caste. Further, the *Mahābhārata* version does not depict the plot of the Kauravas to poison the pond.²²

Kuñcan Nampyār and His Social Environment

Because Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal literature is so laden with portrayals of social tension, it is important to examine the social status and the life of Nampyār himself. Indeed, the narrative and portrayal of it through poetic devices (e.g. satire) can convey the author's views on the points of social tension around him.²³ Nampyār was born in 1705 in what was previously known as Killikuriśśimaṅḡalam (currently known as Pālakkād). The castes of his parents are not known with complete certainty, but Nampyār lived and worked as a member of the Nampyār caste. The primary role of members of this caste was to play the *miḷāvũ* (a kind of drum) during Cākyār Kūttū performances. Nampyār's main mentor was Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭatiri, a member of the same caste as he. It is doubtful that Nampyār ever married or had children. Some scholars argue that Nampyār either took the alias Rāma Pāṇivāda or shared some of his works with him. Sharma argues that the most logical perspective is that in which Rāma Pāṇivāda and Nampyār are two separate individuals.²⁴ Some of his main patrons were King Mārttāṇḍa Varmma and his successor, Rāma Varmma.²⁵ He was a resident at their court in what was then Travancore. During the time that these kings were his patrons, Kerala was undergoing a time of political unrest in which colonialization brought into question the existence of kingship in general,

²² van Buitenen, *The Mahabharata: The Book of the Assembly Hall, The Book of the Forest*, 2:207–8.

²³ David Shulman, "True Fiction," in *More Than Real* (Harvard University Press, 2012), 230.

²⁴ Sharma, *Kunchan Nampyar*. 11-16.

²⁵ Ēvūr Paramēśvaran, *Nampyāruṁ Tuḷḷalsāhityavum* (Kōṭṭayam: Nāṣanal Bukkstāl, 1969). 23-28

strongholds of land changed hands between various authorities, and Nampyārs were undergoing a decline in their elite classification within Kerala society.²⁶

In his book *Social Formations of Early South India*, Rajan Gurukkal writes of “temple castes” (Ampalavāsi castes) which take on roles in service of the temple. These castes arose c. 9-10th centuries.²⁷ Members of these castes were paid in land, which, combined with the effect of having a specific role at the temple, caused the roles to become hereditary. One of the groups that Gurukkal mentions is the Cākkaimār (original) or Cākkiyār (current name) caste, whom he refers to as “dancers of the temple.”²⁸ Nampyār’s caste indeed served the temple by performing in Cākyār Kūttū performances.

Ēvūr Paramēśvaran echoes Gurukkal’s statement that Kuñcan Nampyār is a member of a “temple caste.” He writes that Nampyār was a member of the “Pūṇunūl Illāṭṭa Cākyār Nampyār” caste, which translates to “the Nampyār that does not bear a sacred thread”.²⁹ The use of the word “Cākyār” here indicates the role of this caste in performing in Cākyār Kūttū performances. Paramēśvaran derives this ancestry from Nampyār’s mother according to the matrilineal system (*marumakkattāyam*). The caste of his mother—a Nāyar—is known, whereas the identity of his father—potentially a Nampūtiri Brahmin—is unknown. However, the Nampyār caste was a fairly elite group among the Nāyars due to their roles in temple service. The system of *marumakkattāyam* is a defining characteristic of the Nāyar caste, the consequences of which has sometimes formed a point of social tension.

²⁶ Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976), 14–16.

²⁷ Rajan Gurukkal, *Social Formations of Early South India* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 311.

²⁸ Gurukkal, 313.

²⁹ Paramēśvaran, *Nampyāruṁ Tuḷḷalsāhityavum*, 27.

The Nāyar caste is a major caste in Kerala. It has historically taken on a role of prestige, but is technically of the Śudra class; although it is presented as a warrior class in various literature including *Ghōṣayātra*, it is not of the Kṣatriya class.³⁰ The caste system in South India and in Kerala in particular has been often referenced as one of the most extreme manifestations of the caste system in South Asia. Robin Jeffrey attributes this to the observation of distance pollution, wherein certain castes can “pollute” other caste by virtue of merely coming within a certain distance rather than having any physical contact.³¹

Social Expression through Tuḷḷal

Points of social tension—for example, caste, kingship, and *marumakkattāyam*, as mentioned above—are of central importance to Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal literature, and this is evident in *Ghōṣayātra*. One way in which Nampyār highlights these issues is through the use of satire. Satire here means the use of irony, sarcasm, or general absurdity in the portrayal of certain characters or situations. Nampyār ridicules certain individuals through sarcasm, creates a sense of absurdity by placing certain individuals in situations in which they normally would not be, and portrays individuals doing things which could be construed as “scandalous.”

³⁰ Nicholas Dirks, in his article “Castes of Mind,” writes that caste in India does not reflect the 4 varṇas like post-colonial literature implies. He reflects that caste is not a “site for textualization.” This rings true in that rather than textualization, performance arts such as Tuḷḷal do not reflect textualization, but expression. Nicholas Dirks, “Castes of Mind,” *Representations* 37 (Winter 1992): 64–66. Here, the word “caste” is used to refer to *jāti*, and the word “class” is used to refer to *varṇa*. Although previous scholars such as McKim Marriott and Ronald Inden have referred to both *varṇa* and *jāti* under one singular category of “caste,” this is not necessarily effective when considering caste in South India. The caste system in South India is distinct in that there is a great emphasis on caste rather than class. Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). Kuñcan Nampyār references castes rather than classes in his works.

³¹ Robin Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1976) xv.

Although Nampyār could have included satirical material on a variety of subjects, he chose specifically to highlight issues surrounding Nāyars, *marumakkattāyam*, and, more subtly, kingship. Intriguingly, the king, commissioning him for his work, would have known that this was his writing style. He thus could have possibly encouraged this style, desiring an entertaining performance, but also a work that made hard-hitting claims about society. In fact, Nampyār satirizes the king, his patron, himself. Reasons aside, *Ghōṣayātra* represents an arena where social issues were actively engaged with, both on the side of the author and the side of the audience.

Section III—Social Issues in *Ghōṣayātra*: Textual Study

One way in which Nampyār comments on issues of social tension through *Ghōṣayātra* is through satirizing members of the Nāyar caste. This caste has historically served the role of soldier in Kerala, but technically is classified under the Śūdra class. Dirks has demonstrated that the *varṇa* structure is an over-textualization of caste in India, and Fuller also writes that scholars are “mistaken in that the [*varṇa*] system...is ever accorded with historical reality.”³² This certainly applies to South India and the Nāyar caste. He also raises the point that the internal structures of the Nāyar caste were historically much more likely an ideal rather than a reality.³³ Although there are historical accounts of the Nāyar caste (e.g. censuses and gazetteers), and although details about the Nāyar caste appear in academic discourse, having the added perspective of portraits of the Nāyar caste through performative texts such as *Ghōṣayātra* helps to gain a more complete account of the nature of the caste in history.

In his book, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908*, Robin Jeffrey outlines the nature of the Nāyar caste throughout history. He classifies the Nāyar caste as a dominant caste, but one that provides services, namely to Brahmin castes—often the Nampūtiri caste. Nāyar women often formed *saṁbandham* relationships with Nampūtiri Brahmin men. These *saṁbandham* relationships were essentially a socially-supported sexual relationship. Although not an official marriage, there were ceremonies that solidified the union, and children could result from these relationships. The nuances of the roles of the Nāyar caste have changed throughout history. Originally, the caste formed a protective role similar to that of the Kṣatriya class. Kṣatriya individuals were sparse in Kerala, and the Nāyar caste served

³² C.J. Fuller, “The Internal Structure of the Nayar Caste,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 31, no. 4 (Winter 1975): 290.

³³ Fuller, 287.

these roles usually.³⁴ In *Ghōṣayātra*, Nampyār paints a picture of this army status, writing, “After hearing the command, Nāyars started to throng around powerfully.”³⁵ This portrayal carries further later in the text with, “For the purpose of war, with haste, Nāyars flooded all the roadways. In that way, the amount of [Nāyar] bodies there was great.”³⁶

At approximately the time that Nampyār began to compose *Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal*, the role of the Nāyars was shifting. Nāyars, thought to be the most numerous Hindu caste in Kerala, had a matrilineal family structure and each family had a specific plot of land on which they lived. Often, Nāyars were heads of a village or neighborhood. The time at which Nampyār began to compose *Tuḷḷal* marked the tipping point of the decline of the normally dominant role that the Nāyar caste had originally assumed. Namely, their status diverged from a “feudal force” and toward a stereotypical conception of an army.³⁷ K.M. Panikkar echoes this, claiming in *A History of Kerala* that “The second half of the 18th century...witnessed the destruction of the political predominance of the Nāyars and this is the most capital fact in the history of Kerala during the last 400 years.”³⁸

Further, Mārttāṇḍa Varmma—Nampyār’s patron—executed several Nāyar chiefs beginning in 1729, and replaced them with Paṭṭanmār, or TAMILIAN Brahmins.³⁹ Given the changing place of Nāyars in the society around him, it makes sense that Nampyār would include images reflecting on Nāyars in his writings, and even images that challenge the prosperity of certain Nāyars.

³⁴ Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908*, 14–16.

³⁵ “*kalpana kēṭṭoru nāyanmāruṁ kelpoṭu vannu nīrañṇu tuṭaṇṇi.*” Nampyār, “*Ghōṣayātra*,” 252.

³⁶ “*Nāyanmār uṭṇōṭu nēratte āyudham ellām valiyil pōyi āyatu pinneyum uṇṭākkīṭām kāyaṁ kiṭṭukil atu bahu lābham.*” Nampyār, 264.

³⁷ Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908*, 3.

³⁸ K. M. Panikkar, *A History of Kerala (1498-1801)* (Annamalainagar, 1960), 309.

³⁹ Nampyār even mentions these Paṭṭanmār several times throughout *Ghōṣayātra*.

Therefore, one must wonder whether Nampyār, serving his patron Mārttāṇḍa Varmma, sought to further deface the perception of Nāyars in order to please him. It is also possible that Nampyār intended to include a reflection on the involvement of the Paṭṭanmār in these matters, given that he mentions the caste several times in close proximity to his descriptions of Nāyars. According to Jeffrey, Nampyār also speaks negatively of TAMILIAN Brahmins in other writings.⁴⁰

Jeffrey questions, however, whether the society in which the Nāyars upheld this structure was as “idyllic” as originally conceived.⁴¹ In a sense, Nampyār’s portrayals of the behavior of the caste act to answer this question.⁴² Reflecting on Logan’s thoughts, Jeffrey writes, “the eye, the hand and the order [of the Nampūtiris]—all depend on Nāyars.”⁴³ This echoes the *Kēraḷōlpatti*, which says the same.⁴⁴ This being said, it is impossible to describe all Nāyars under one classification, whether it be “protector” or “soldier.” Within the caste are many sub-castes which may express dominance to varying degrees according to their roles and with whom they interact. Nampyār displays this heterogeneity to some extent when he portrays a “proper Nāyar” interacting with Nāyars whom Nampyār ridicules as drug abusers or squanderers of the king’s resources.

Fuller writes that Nāyars could increase their status by not associating with anyone of a “demeaning” occupation, by “Sanskritizing” customs, changing their name, or of course, by having their marriages or *saṃbandham* relationships.⁴⁵ The status of the Nāyar family was closely related to the status of the Nampūtiri family with which they were associated through

⁴⁰ Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908*, 13.

⁴¹ “From the earliest time...down to the end of the 18th century the Nayar *tara* and *nad* organization kept the country from oppression and tyranny on the part of the rulers.” William Logan, *Malabar*, vol. 1, 2 vols. (Madras: Government Press), 597.

⁴² Jeffrey, *The Decline of Nayar Dominance: Society and Politics in Travancore, 1847-1908*.

⁴³ Jeffrey, 14.

⁴⁴ *Kēraḷōlpatti*, Second (Mangalore: Pflleiderer & Riehm, 1868), 132–33.

⁴⁵ Fuller, “The Internal Structure of the Nayar Caste,” 294.

saṃbandham relationships.⁴⁶ One example of this link between status and marriage occurs in *Ghōṣayātra*, when two Nāyar sisters are speaking to each other about Nāyar marriage (marriage between two Nāyars, rather than a *saṃbandham* relationship). The older sister says,

Also hear this, small younger sister: When mother has the desire to marry you to a Nāyar who can sustain the household, that is not sufficient for the aunt [mother's sister]. How brave is the scheming mother to change the uncle's [mother's brother] mind. They gave grain to bring some sort of useless person to our household, a person who consumes opium and sits tight without opening his eyes such that we might consider him as stone—the kind of a person who has no awareness at all.⁴⁷

Satire takes the form of sarcasm in this passage and is especially indicated by the phrase “how brave is the scheming mother?” (*ammāpāpikketra viśēṣam*). The word “*viśēṣam*” is translated here as “brave,” but the literal definition of the word is “distinction.” Hence, a more literal translation of the text would be “how much distinction is there for the scheming mother?” The mother here (*amma*) is painted as scheming (indicated by the word *pāpi*) for attempting to change the uncle's mind. The phrase could also altogether be translated “how big of a deal is the sinning mother?” or “wow, what a big deal the sinning mother is.” Hence, here Nampyār utilizes the distortion of the connotation of the word *viśēṣam* from the relatively neutral meaning “distinction” to a negatively-intended meaning “bravery” or “big deal” stemming from the word *pāpi* to create a sense of sarcasm. The phrase “*vīṭu pularttān*” translates to “sustain a home.”

⁴⁶ Fuller, 293.

⁴⁷ “*itu kēṭṭālum koccū aniyattī, atiyāyittū oru vīṭu pularttān mati āyittoru nāyare nirttān ammaykkū āgraham uṇṭāyappōḷ ammāvikkū atu sammataṁ allā, ammāvanṭe manassu maṇippān ammāpāpikkū etra viśēṣam; vallātū oru bhōṣaccār namme illattēkkum koṇṭu tiriccān nellu koṭuttu kaṇṇupum tinnū oru kallū kaṇakkīnu kuttīyirikkum kaṇṇu tuṇakkū ennuḷḷatum illa ipponṇaccārkkū oru bōdhavum illā*” Nampyār, “*Ghōṣayātra*,” 257.

Using sarcasm in the form of this distortion of the connotation of the word *viśēṣam* as a pointer, Nampyār draws attention to the issues of status and *marumakkattāyam*.

Beyond literally maintaining a household through a steady income and other normal household activities, this implies the continuation of a “household” in the sense of the family name. The subsequent use of the word “*matī*” or “enough” indicates the capability of a certain Nāyar to join the home and provide sustenance to the family, but can also indicate the status of the individual. If all of these elements were suitable to the status of the Nāyar home, then all members of the family would have consented to the marriage. But it seems that Nampyār is bringing attention here to the idea that there are so many elements that facilitate a Nāyar relationship being approved that it is nearly unfeasible.

Of perhaps greater import to the above passage is the underlying influence of the system of *marumakkattāyam* on marital relationships of the Nāyar caste. Under this system—which would have been common during Nampyār’s time—inheritance is traced through the eldest son of the eldest female, that is, the nephew of the eldest male. The eldest female through whom inheritance is traced is called the *kāraṇavatī*, and the eldest male (her brother) in whom the inheritances is vested is the *kāraṇavan*. In the case of the above passage the mother (here, *amma*) is the younger daughter in a set of children comprised of an elder son, an elder daughter, and a younger daughter. In this case, the family’s inheritance lies with the son, and the next inheritor is the eldest son of the elder daughter. That is, the most relevant offspring in this group are those of the elder daughter—among them will be the *kāraṇavatī* and the *kāraṇavan*.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Donald Davis, “Matrilineal Adoption, Inheritance Law, and Rites for the Dead among Hindus in Medieval Kerala,” ed. Steven Lindquist, *Religion and Identity in South Asia and Beyond: Essays in Honor of Patrick Olivelle*, 2011, 150–51.

The younger daughter (*amma*) here is having difficulty finding a husband for her children because they are of little consequence to the inheritance and property lines of the family. Further, the mother herself does not have as much of a say in the family matters as that of her elder sister (the *kāraṇavatī*), through whom the paths of inheritance will be traced. In terms of marriage, it is in the elder sister's interest to obtain the most prosperous marital pairings for her offspring, because it is these offspring who indicate and receive inheritance for the family. The wealth of the offspring of the younger daughter which may or may not be gained through marriage is irrelevant to the wealth of the family as a whole because it would not be passed forward through the lines of *marumakkattāyam*. Further, the younger daughter simply has less influence than the elder daughter in the family due to the authority that *marumakkattāyam* vests in the eldest daughter rather than the younger one. The passage takes on more significance in that it is being addressed toward a younger sister (*aniyattī*).

Nampyār utilizes the bitterness of sarcasm to portray the above point of tension because it shows a social structure around him that may be problematic in that it neglects the younger sister and her side of the family. If it is not a personal sentiment of Nampyār that this system is problematic, the passage serves as an indication that others found the phenomenon problematic in some way. Nampyār here offers a portrait of the system which can further clarify it, and ground academic or historical explanations of the system with a more complete representation of the actual experience of someone who is affected by it (the mother and the younger sister).

Nampyār includes descriptions of Nāyars which depict them as rowdy, using drugs and alcohol, complaining, and too lazy to succeed at their role of being soldiers. This is displayed in the plot, for example, when Duryodhanan orders that all Nāyars gather for the march on the Dvaita Forest:

We need a hundred people to go and get all the ingredients to give food to the Nāyars and bring them here. We need tobacco, betel leaf, marijuana, different kinds of toddy, and opium. We must bring all of these ingredients here; to be ready for war, we must collect many things⁴⁹

So, not only do the Nāyars not come when simply summoned (“*iha...viravoṭu*”: [for the purpose of] bringing [them] here), they must be bribed into coming. Further yet, they must be bribed into coming with alcohol (“*kaḷḷu*”) and drugs (“*kañcāvū*”: marijuana)! In expressing such things, Nampyār makes quite the statement about Nāyars. The question here is whether Nampyār thought of the use of substances such as drugs and alcohol as shameful, or whether he thought of the *abuse* of it as shameful. It would be an anachronism to overlay contemporary negative connotations that come with drugs and alcohol onto 18th century tactics of war that may very well have been normal and accepted; perhaps soldiers used these substances to cope with the strains of battle or bolster themselves before battle, but Nampyār here seems to pair the visualization of the Nāyars using these substances with satire or negative connotation. This is evident in that this passage is taken in the context of the previous conversation between two sisters, which negatively portrays the usage of opium (*karuppu*) by a Nāyar husband who would sit tight (*kuttiyirikkum*) like a stone (*kallukaṇakkinu*) as a result of using it. In that context, perhaps he is implying that some Nāyars abuse these substances.

Nampyār does not stop here, but continues hurling insults at Nāyars. This time, he portrays them as complainers; in a conversation between two Nāyar wives who are complaining about their husbands, they themselves complain that the husbands complain too much, saying,

⁴⁹ “*nāyanmārkkū iha cōrū koṭuppan āyatinuḷḷa padārttham aśēṣam viravoṭu koṇṭū varēṇam atinūāi irunūṛṭ janam pōyītēṇam pukayila vēṭṭila kañcāvum palavakayil kaḷḷu karuppuṇ vēṇam sakala padārtthavum innu varutti sannāham pala kūṭṭītēṇam.*” Nampyār, “Ghōṣayātra,” 251.

“Yet another thought: when another person comes into our home, he [husband] creates an uproar, finds some kind of fault in me, and threatens to stop my livelihood!”⁵⁰

In particular, the phrase “*kalampum kuttam vaśśatumonnuṇṭākki*” cuttingly expresses complaint, with “*kalampum*” meaning “uproar,” “*kuttam*” meaning “fault,” and “*uṇṭākki*” normally meaning “to make” but here meaning “to find.” Thus, this provides yet another example of a portrayal of Nāyars as lazy complainers. At this point in the text, Nampyār has included so many insults or exaggerations of Nāyars that including yet another (“*maṭṭoru*”) one is satirical.

It is ambiguous whether Nampyār is implying that there is a certain stereotype attributed to the Nāyar caste with regard to engaging in these behaviors of drug abuse and is making a caricature of these behaviors, or whether the statement simply serves to add humor to the text. If it is the former, then this excerpt serves as an example of Nampyār’s commentary on a potential point of tension in the society around him—Nāyar drug abuse. If it is the latter, then Nampyār is using irony and that Nāyars were known for or expected to *not* engage in these behaviors. It is not possible to determine with absolute certainty which of these options is more correct. It is enough to say that Kuñcan Nampyār is drawing on a socially relevant topic to elicit a response from his audience. Therefore, it can be said that the use of drugs among Nāyars was useful to Kuñcan Nampyār in some manner, and had to resonate with the world outside the stage. Indeed, Nampyār makes another ironic statement when he writes, “At a time when the king—the ruler—is ruling as the son of Krishna, the goddess Māya plays in each and every Nāyar household.”⁵¹ One interpretation of this statement is an ironic one in which actual illusion (*māya*: Skt. *māyā*) is

⁵⁰ “*maṭṭoru cinta namukkū illētum maṭṭoru puruṣan vīṭṭil varumpōḷ eṭṭām nammute nāyar kalampum kuttam vaśśatum onnuṇṭākki...*” Nampyār, 257.

⁵¹ “*māyāvitannute makanām mannavan āyatū nayanān vāṇoru kālam nāyanmāruṭe vīṭukaltōruṁ māyābhagavati viḷayāṭunnu.*” Nampyār, 241.

rife in the households of Nāyars. This would imply that any prosperity observed among Nāyars is transient and merely a front for underlying problematic behaviors. The statement could also be providing information about the dominant and prosperous nature of the Nāyar caste through including the image of the goddess Māya—the miraculous power of Kṛṣṇa to do wondrous things, often personified as a goddess—playing in the home. Given the many statements that follow this one about Nāyars being lazy or abusing drugs, these two interpretations taken together is conducive to a sense of irony. Hence, this statement provides insight into Nampyār’s perception of the dominance of Nāyars in the society around him, even if the statement is relatively lighthearted. Namely, Nampyār seems to be implying that Nāyars can be prosperous, but that there are also certain characteristics about them that would be conducive to being played fun at.

It is not entirely possible to ascertain whether Nampyār intended his commentary on caste as exemplified above to be a serious insult to his audience—Nāyar soldiers—or whether it was simply a way of poking fun at certain individuals in order to either test their limits or please them.⁵² It is likely that a large majority of Nampyār’s audience was Nāyar soldiers attempting to liven their hours of the night watch by viewing performances of *Tuḷḷal*.⁵³ If Nampyār’s relationship with his audience was, indeed, composed mainly of Nāyar soldiers, then his relationship with his audience would have been a lighthearted one in which the Nāyars felt no serious threat or insult to their identity. This further indicates that repeating insults to Nāyar characters is satirical.

⁵² The latter concept is discussed at length in Donald Davis’ article “Satire as Apology: The Puruṣārthakkūttū of Kerala”. The concept of the relationship between the poet and the audience in Kerala performing traditions is also covered at length in Moser’s “Many “Kūṭiyāṭṭams”: Emotions and Rituals in Kerala’s Sanskrit Theater between Tradition and Modernity,” and David Shulman’s book *More Than Real*.

⁵³ Sharma, *Kunchan Nampyār*, 83.

For example, while Duryodhanan is convincing Karna to summon a messenger/servant to ascertain the status of the Pāṇḍavas in Dvaita Forest, he exclaims,

The number of servants who are destroying my wealth is ever-increasing; When they estimate the portions of their food to be deficient, they go and force the Kuṭṭipaṭṭars to make more.⁵⁴

The “servants” (“*bhṛtyanmār*”) that Duryodhanan references here are likely Nāyars, given that the less-than-professional behavior of the Nāyars is described at length in a similar way in numerous other sections of the text. The Kuṭṭipaṭṭars are a Brahmin caste whose main occupation was to cook food for higher caste individuals. This phenomenon of forcing the Kuṭṭipaṭṭars to cook is satirical in its use of the phrase “when they estimate their portions of food to be deficient.” The phrase conjures images of a group of needy Nāyars taking special time out of their day to sit around and assess their food intake and plot ways of attaining more food, one method of which is deliberately forcing the Kuṭṭipaṭṭars to cook for them rather than waiting their turn to receive their allotted portion. Such a vivid portrayal of this group of Nāyars’ bad manners is one of a string of similar insults by Duryodhanan. The repeated accumulation of such insults results in a humorous scenario, suggesting a certain perception of local Nāyars in this window of time.

This passage initiates a long string of jests directed toward slacking Nāyars, and its particular method and direction of ridicule carries into subsequent scenes. Further, in some cases Nampyār pays special attention to the prestige of certain castes as compared to others. As the Kauravas prepare for war, Duryodhanan orders,

⁵⁴ “*ennuṭe mutalu muṭippan eppōlum ennuṭe bhṛtyanmār mutirunnu, aṣṭi kaṇakkinu kūṭāññāl avar kuṭṭippaṭṭare ēttamiṭṭkum!*” Nampyār, “Ghōṣayātra,” 245.

Don't delay at all: gather together Paṭṭāṇis, many Ceṭṭis, Kōmaṭṭis, many Paṭṭans to go to the forest! Now we have a pressing need to collect the most heroic, strong, and wealthy men to rouse the Nāyars. If *they* go, the Nāyars might show up faster. We *must* assemble all of our vehicles of war and their accoutrements.⁵⁵

The castes mentioned in this passage are referenced in other sources, but the above context is helpful for discerning the way that the castes may have manifested in action.

By way of basic description of the castes of this passage, the Paṭṭāṇis are referenced as an upper caste.⁵⁶ It can be seen in the passage above that they are a prestigious caste. Nampyār places their name among a list of other elite castes and other indicators of military prestige and force. These castes would, in Duryodhanan's eyes, be the only way to motivate the Nāyars, who he had previously been portrayed repeatedly as indulgent and idle. The Ceṭṭis (sometimes "Shetties") are a Tamil trading caste that is in some places identified as a sub-caste of the Nāyar caste whose occupation is trading.⁵⁷; the Kōmaṭṭis are also a Tamil trading caste.⁵⁸ Paṭṭans can be identified as "foreign" or "East Coast" Brahmins. Beyond a classification of these castes, seeing the caste names in the passage above contributes to a more qualitative description of the castes as powerful or influential ones.

Further, in the above passage, Duryodhanan seeks to gather all of the above castes for the march of the Kauravas on the Dvaita Forest because he predicts that the inclusion of these castes will serve to intimidate the Pāṇḍavas due to their pseudo-renunciate status of being exiled to the forest. This reveals that, at the time of Nampyār's life, these castes may have been castes that

⁵⁵ "paṭṭāṇikaḷ pala ceṭṭikaḷuṁ kōmaṭṭikaḷuṁ pala paṭṭanmāruṁ vaṭṭamkūṭi vanattinu pōvānoṭṭuṁ tāmasamarutū ini nammūṭe puṣṭaśrībharapauruṣam avarēkkāṭṭū atinu namukkū utsāhaṁ nāyanmāre varuttīṭṭi atinu pōyāluṁ cilar vēgam idānīṁ āyudha vāhana kōppukal ellām āyatupōle varuttīṭṭēṇaṁ." Nampyār, 251.

⁵⁶ N. Subramhanya Aiyar, *Census of India, 1901: Travancore* (Trivandrum, 1903), 338.

⁵⁷ Internal Structure of the Nayar Caste."; William Logan, "The People," in *Malabar*, vol. 1 (Madras: Government Press, n.d.), 126.

⁵⁸ Subramhanya Aiyar, *Census of India, 1901: Travancore*, 338.

were typically considered elite castes. Furthermore, this excerpt also includes the same criticism of Nāyars that is present throughout *Ghōṣayātra*. It places a portrayal of the strength of dominant castes in close proximity to the Nāyars; this proximity paired with the fact that the elite castes are the only force capable of moving the Nāyars suggests that the Nāyars to be summoned are lazy, and continues with the same extreme, repeated emphasis of Nāyar laziness. Thus, the satire of over-exaggeration here draws attention not only to the problem of Nāyar laziness, but also creates the opportunity for Nampyār to qualify the strength of other castes.

Ghōṣayātra also includes commentary on the roles of members of the Nāyar caste through satire of their non-adherence to these roles. In gathering for war and the march on the Dvaita Forest, the Nāyars present in the army begin conversing with one another. During one conversation, one Nāyar remarks,

If you come into this world as a Nāyar, then you [automatically] need a weapon. Know that there is no point for a Nāyar who does not possess this thing in even having a body.”⁵⁹

This provides explicit reference to the duty that Nampyār perceives as intertwined with the Nāyar identity. That is, bearing and using weapons in the role of a soldier. The Nāyar role of the soldier is one that is addressed in numerous texts. Fuller, for example, writes that Nāyars from higher sub-castes would have been soldiers.⁶⁰ He also raises the possibility that Kṣatriyas could be treated “merely as superiminent Nāyar subdivisions.”⁶¹ So, the duties of the Nāyar are not far from being reminiscent of the duties of Kṣatriyas, a *varṇa* traditionally classified as a militaristic one. It thus makes sense that one Nāyar would be incredulous about another Nāyar not wielding

⁵⁹ “*nāyanmārāy vannu pīrannāl āyudham onnu tanikkāy vēṇaṁ āyatinū oru vakayillātta avanuṭe kāyaṁkoṇṭṭu oru phalam illa arivin!*” Nampyār, “*Ghōṣayātra*,” 253.

⁶⁰ Fuller, “The Internal Structure of the Nayar Caste,” 287.

⁶¹ Fuller, 293.

a weapon and, beyond this, not using that weapon. In fact, such a portrayal places the identity of “soldier” at a higher priority than the individuality—or even the life—of the speaker. Therefore, Nampyār here is likely criticizing the over-exaggerated identification of Nāyar individuals with their roles of being soldiers.

This above passage is placed in a conversation that has an overall humorous hue, and thus adds a critical lens to the ideas that the speaker here conveys. If it is not making claims about the validity of the identity of a soldier, it may instead hold claims that it is absurd to ascribe a singular identity as soldiers to one given group of people in the first place. My initial translation, however, does not entirely do justice to the satirical feeling of the passage, and thus some of the meanings or implications are lost. The platitudes that are conveyed in a more literal translation are actually being conveyed sarcastically here, because the words being used are overly dramatic. In the passages before and after this, the Nāyars in the conversation use vernacular, casual Malayalam. Here, however, the speaker uses less casual constructions such as “*vannupirannāl*” meaning “was produced and came,” or “was begotten,” rather than the colloquial term for being born. The speaker also uses the Sanskrit term for “result,” “*phalam*.” This brings a formal touch to the meaning of the sentence, which I have translated above as “there is no point.” However, a more apt translation would capture the sarcasm that is intended with such an overly-dramatic and formal inclusion of Sanskrit. Taking all of the above into account, a more fitting translation of the sentence which captures the sarcasm and the critical meaning that comes along with it is:

When Nāyars grace the earth with their birth, every one of them is born with a sword in hand—at least one. Get this in your head: there is no point in a Nāyar’s body without this thing.

A speaker in the same conversation continues, complaining:

Nāyars have to follow orders day and night, and these bosses still don't have a mind to pay us. If we speak up about this, they conjure up faults about us [as an excuse].⁶²

This time, the tone is more casual and contains fewer formal elements. This is indicated with the informal term “*kāśu*” meaning “payment.” The tone is satirical to the extent that a casual tone of complaining is being used in a performance, but the Nāyar here is genuinely expressing distress at the way in which Nāyars are being treated. Thus, Nampyār is criticizing an element of the nature of the Nāyar caste or Nāyar identity that is nonsensical. Taken to the extreme, this cutting statement perhaps conveys that although the Nāyar caste is an elite one, some Nāyars aren't even guaranteed a consistent income, and are still victim to an unfair authority begotten by a broken system. But at the very least, the statement is drawing attention to an issue that Nampyār has likely noticed in his surroundings, perhaps even from a Nāyar in his audience.

In a climax of utter absurdity, Nampyār compounds the satirical perspective of the two Nāyars in conversation from the above two passages and the numerous passages that include remarks on the laziness of certain Nāyars with a caricature of “proper Nāyars”:

There was the din of the leading Nāyars who walk in the front of the procession cleverly casting off their drum and uniforms and running swiftly in a rush to their house intending to hide there—the din of Proper Nāyars who had simply come to grab the hair of the [escaping] Nāyars, and dole out four or five hits to them. Meanwhile there was a separate chaos of Nāyars retreating too soon from the forest [the battlefield] in one direction.⁶³

⁶² “*rāyumu pakalumu kalpana kēlkkumu nāyanmārkkū oru kāśu koṭuppān ī yajamānanmārkkū manassilāyatu connāl kuṭṭavum uṇṭām...*!” Nampyār, “Ghōṣayātra,” 253–54.

⁶³ “*uṭakkumu koṭṭikkoṇṭū agrē naṭakkunna mēlakkāran uṭukkumu muṇṭumu kaḷañṇu miṭukkumu bhāviccu maṇṭi tiṭukkam puṇṭoru vīṭṭil kaṭappān bhāvikkunnēraṁ kaṭuttanāyartān vannu taṭuttān atrayum allā muṭikkumu piṭiccu nālū aṇṇū aṭikkunna ghōṣam kēṭṭu: poṭukkū ennu kāṭṭil pukku kiṭakkunna nāyanmār vannū aṭukkunna kōlāhalaṁ kaṭukkunna uṇṭū oru dikkil.*” Nampyār, 265.

Here the “Hardened Nāyar” or “Strict Nāyar” (“*kaṭuttanāyar*”) is the embodiment of caste restraints being followed as exactly as possible, while the Nāyars that are attempting to escape may, by contrast, embody not following caste restraints. The Nāyars are seen at the very beginning of battle either escaping from the battle or disciplining others who are attempting to escape from the battle. Ironically, either way, there are no Nāyars actually accomplishing the role with which they had previously been associated—fighting in battle. Although there are no sub-castes directly mentioned, there are clearly tensions within the caste that have divided the ranks, so to speak. Although a Nāyar who would have adhered exactly to caste ideals would be “more Nāyar,” and perhaps a more elite Nāyar, such divisibility within the caste has resulted in internal instability to the extent that the caste as a whole in this scene has strayed far from its previously-stated duty of fighting. Here satire is evident in the absurdity of the scene: Nāyars are scrambling in every direction, each with their own intention, with no one actually accomplishing anything. The scene also includes the absurd image of someone grabbing a person by the hair to beat them. The casual usage of the phrase “four or five hits” (*nālañcaṭi—nālū, añcū aṭi*) also adds to satirical nature of the image. This scene overall serves to draw attention to perhaps an inefficacy of internal conflict that Nampyār may have observed among the Nāyars around him, or even in his audience.

On a separate note, several times throughout *Ghōṣayātra*, Nampyār mentions a caste called the Kaṇakkapillās. In *Malabar*, Logan mentions a caste named Kaṇakkār, dubbing it the “sharing staff” or “share workers.”⁶⁴ It is also referenced in the Census of India (1901) as “Kanikkar.” These castes have had the role of the accountant or treasurer. While Nampyār seemingly refers to these individuals as a separate group, Logan refers to Kaṇakkār in the sense

⁶⁴ Logan, “The People,” 111–12.

that the Kaṇakkār are one possible role of Nāyars. This would fulfill the idea that the Nāyars take on many roles, but it is at odds with Nampyār's portrayal of the group, because his portrayal paints the Kaṇakkapiḷlas as set out from the Nāyars of the story. This highlights the importance of portrayals of the term in works other than *Malabar* or the Census. While in *Malabar* Logan spends time seeking to parse the term, one possible usage—reference to a treasurer caste—is shown in *Ghōṣayātra* that may provide an answer to his question as to the true meaning of the term.⁶⁵ The text reads:

With what you see here—all of [the Kauravas] just sitting around—it's not easy for us to handle appropriately without Kaṇakkapiḷlas and Mēnōkyaccans.⁶⁶

Here, the castes within the ranks of the Kauravas have become blurred in that all of the Kauravas have been piled on top of each other in their imprisonment. Taken in the context of distance pollution, it would have been critical to sort the castes into appropriate spaces. In trying to free them, Bhīman knows that he must rectify the blurring of these caste divisions and put them in the “appropriate” (“*nalla citattil*”) positions. The dividing lines of caste are so stark that the role of an accountant—a caste in and of itself—is required to sort out the mess. Both the words “Kaṇakkapiḷlakal” and “Mēnōkyaccanmār” refer to these accounting castes. The role of the Kaṇakkapiḷlas in this passage resonates with similar understandings elsewhere. The satire here arises in the sense of the phrase “just sitting around” (*verute irippān*) which is a casual phrase in Malayalam. It is satirical because the soldiers are not “just sitting around” of their own volition—they are imprisoned, and being imprisoned is normally a serious matter. Here, the satire is used to more clearly convey the problem that only the accountant castes could solve due

⁶⁵ Logan, “The People.”

⁶⁶ “*kāṇunnīla kaṇakkapiḷlakaḷ mēnōkyaccanmārum atū illā, nalla citattil kuṭi namukkū eḷutalla ini ivaruṭe verute irippān.*” Nampyār, “Ghōṣayātra,” 280.

to their role in society. Further, it draws attention to an issue of social tension, namely distance pollution, that Nampyār observed in the society around him.

Nampyār’s use of vernacular Malayalam, in particular his use of vernacular in a discussion of caste, is a defining characteristic of his compositions. Much of the time, the use of this vernacular adds humor to the scene in that casual Malayalam is being spoken onstage at a performance, a previously formal setting through performance arts such as Cākyār Kūttū. As aforementioned, there are a variety of places in *Ghōṣayātra* in which vernacular speech is used by individuals to whom such speech would not normally be attributed. One example is mentioned above, in which Duryodhanan exclaims, “Hey, you, messenger who doesn’t have any property inside or outside: Stop! What could you know?”⁶⁷ By portraying a king speaking informally, Nampyār satirizes the role of kingship, drawing the king closer to the audience by equalizing their speech, bringing it “down to earth.” Here, Nampyār draws attention to the lofty roles of the king which would be conducive to him speaking down to a messenger in this way.

However, Nampyār’s use of vernacular is also enlightening when it is used in places or between people where one might expect. For example, two Nāyars in conversation repeatedly use the word “*kūvā*.”⁶⁸ This is a slang term which roughly translates to “hey, dude,” with somewhat of an exclamatory and accusatory tone. However, no royal individuals such as Duryodhanan or Karṇa are shown using this term. If the usage of this term is placed here non-ironically (it is likely being used non-ironically given that individuals of royalty of the story *never* use it, whereas *only* Nāyars use it), then it offers a fairly accurate portrayal of Nampyār’s perception of the society around him, and a potential look into caste in 18th century Kerala. The usage of this term would also support the idea that Nampyār’s audience is predominantly

⁶⁷ “*oṭṭu makam purmillātuḷḷa oru yaṣṭī! Nillu ninakkū entū ariyām?*” Nampyār, 248.

⁶⁸ Nampyār, 251.

composed of Nāyars; in order for the audience to be able to relate to and understand the story, it makes sense to include colloquialisms where they would be most well-received in the text (i.e. during a conversation between two Nāyars). If anything, its usage with Nāyars rather than royals emphasizes the dividing lines of social status in 18th-century Kerala society.

Conclusion

In this report I have addressed Ōṭṭan Tuḷḷal in terms of its relationship with other performance arts in Kerala, as well as *Ghōṣayātra*'s place in articulating points of social tension. Specifically, Kuñcan Nampyār comments on these points of social tension through satire. A major focus of the satire in *Ghōṣayātra* is the Nāyar caste. This, along with the decrease of the Nāyar caste's dominance in the 18th century, proves the significance of Nampyār's choice to satirize individuals of this caste. Through the passages that I have discussed, it is also evident that Nampyār uses his works to comment on issues such as *marumakkattāyam* and kingship. I have also claimed that Nampyār's compositions have the unique feature of portraying a potential picture of the society around him through their usage of Malayalam vernacular. In particular, Duryodhanan, an individual of higher standing, and Nāyars are portrayed using colloquialisms. The relatively high proportion of Malayalam vernacular in Nampyār's works also enables him to appeal to an audience that may have previously been excluded from enjoying other performance arts such as Cākyār Kūttū or Kūṭiyāṭṭam. I have also noted that, in the midst of irony, Nampyār's works contain descriptions of and references to castes beyond perspectives that are only available in texts such as gazetteers or censuses. Taken together, all of the aforementioned elements prove that Nampyār uses satire in his works—including *Ghōṣayātra*—to draw attention to points of social tension in his surroundings. Therefore, although from the outset *Ghōṣayātra* seems to simply play fun at those whom it satirizes, it also provides valuable insight into 18th century society. It is thus a working example of the necessity to study certain aspects of society from multiple angles in order to obtain a complete picture of history. Here, *Ghōṣayātra* and performing arts provide a valuable supplement to academic discussions of Kerala history.

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